

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Chair: Tony Bornhorst, Shelby County Commissioner

Vice Chair: Bill Clinger, Wyandot County Commissioner

Staff: James Kennedy, Policy Analyst

Agriculture is Ohio's No. 1 industry, contributing more than \$100 billion annually to the state's economy and employing one in seven Ohioans. CCAO recognizes that agriculture is the backbone to many counties. Ohio agriculture has great potential for future growth, but it also faces certain challenges, such as improving water quality. A vibrant and sustainable agriculture industry requires investment in key programs both at the state and county level.

Ohio's rural counties similarly face exciting opportunities but also hurdles to future success. As the producer of countless agricultural products exported throughout the world, Ohio's rural communities have much to offer. However, key challenges such as lack of access to high-speed internet service are a threat to rural vitality. This section outlines CCAO's policy recommendations to support Ohio's agriculture industry and rural counties.

COMMITTEE PRIORITIES

WATER QUALITY

Water quality has become one of Ohio's highest priorities. The harmful algal blooms frequently seen in Lake Erie's Western Basin are fueled by excess nutrients contributed by numerous sources: wastewater treatment plants, combined sewer overflows and bypasses, industrial discharges, failing home sewage treatment systems, dredged material and agricultural runoff. These blooms pose risks to public health and negatively impact many lake-based businesses and communities.

As a key contributor of excess nutrients, agriculture has a critical role to play in improving water quality. The agriculture industry has promoted best management practices regarding the placement of nutrients such as the 4 R's – the right fertilizer, the right rate, at the right time, in the right place. Other practices such as cover crops, manure management and soil testing are also important tools promoted by the agriculture industry to prevent nutrient loss. CCAO applauds those producers who utilize nutrient

best management practices and make water quality a priority on their operations. The Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative, which brings together both environmental and agricultural interests, seeks to recognize those producers who demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement in the responsible placement of nutrients. These initiatives and their participating members are examples of environmental stewardship in action.

Simultaneously, there remain producers who do not prioritize water quality. Some of these producers operate small and medium-sized livestock operations that do not fall under the state's regulatory purview. There should be a greater emphasis placed on those who do not promote water quality, regardless of operating size, and funding should be provided to the Ohio Department of Agriculture for these purposes. CCAO maintains that all producers, large or small, must do their part in addressing the state's water quality challenges.

FUNDING FOR WATER QUALITY IMPROVEMENTS, EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

CCAO supports the H2Ohio program and its continued support from the General Assembly. The H2Ohio program invests in farmers who utilize nutrient best management practices, wetland construction projects and local water and sewer infrastructure to improve water quality across the state. Many farmers have utilized these funds to access more modernized equipment and technology to more effectively place nutrients while minimizing runoff. Many of these investments will take time to demonstrate results, and a long-term perspective is necessary to judge program effectiveness.

CCAO MAINTAINS THAT ALL PRODUCERS, LARGE OR SMALL, MUST DO THEIR PART IN ADDRESSING THE STATE'S WATER QUALITY CHALLENGES.

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CCAO supports more state funding for Ohio's research centers to study water quality issues. Heidelberg University's National Center of Water Quality Research, the University of Toledo's Lake Erie Center and Ohio's Sea Grant program, including Ohio State University's Stone Lab, are on the forefront of studying water quality issues.

These institutions work to maintain the health of Lake Erie and support the many economic activities associated with the lake. They monitor and seek solutions to problems around water quality, invasive species and a host of other issues. These research centers also train teachers, P-12 students and college students in key science disciplines and educate a new generation of consumers about the critical nature of Lake Erie's well-being.

Future research should examine the causes of increased phosphorus solubility, as increases in dissolved reactive phosphorus have driven algal bloom development in recent years even while farmers have applied less product. Additionally, the impact of more frequent heavy rain events should be closely monitored, as these storms wash significant nutrients from farm fields and pose challenges for wastewater treatments plants.

SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

A key local partner in improving water quality and natural resource conservation are Ohio's county soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs). CCAO supports a state funding match to incentivize investment in Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). It has long been CCAO's policy to support a 1:1 state to local match for SWCD funding.

In past years, the state match rate for SWCDs fell to as low as 71 cents for every local dollar invested. During the DeWine-Husted Administration, this funding has increased to approximately a 1:1 ratio. It is critical that the state maintain this investment and ensure that all counties across the state have the necessary state resources available to address the unique challenges facing their communities.

SWCDs provide expert assistance to address both agricultural and urban concerns. SWCDs are locally led by a board of five publicly elected county residents to address local priorities. SWCDs:

- Work closely with Ohio's agriculture industry to reduce nutrient impacts suspected to contribute to hazardous algal blooms, through recommending, designing and supervising construction of best management practices and through written nutrient management plans.
- Leverage federal funding from USDA and other sources for local projects. Most SWCDs can show far more money was brought into their county to pass along to landowners than was appropriated by their county commissioners.
- Assist with storm water management and flood prevention through urban programs as well as ditch maintenance and stream obstruction removal projects. SWCD's help county commissioners resolve citizen drainage issues.
- Install best-management practices through nutrient credit trading programs helping reduce the cost of a treatment plant or point source upgrades by implementing less costly non-point source conservation practices in the watershed.
- Encourage the wise use or conservation of natural resources so they can be used by current and future generations.

Additionally, CCAO believes any enforcement of agricultural regulations should be done by ODA or Ohio EPA, while SWCDs main functions should be maintained as an advisory role. It is critical that the trust and relationships SWCDs have with local farmers be maintained.

RURAL BROADBAND AND COMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE

One of rural Ohio's most pressing challenges is access to reliable and affordable broadband service. Estimates have indicated that at least 300,000 Ohio households lack access to broadband internet service. The new BroadbandOhio maps show that this number has increased, with 841,647 underserved households receiving less than 25/3 internet speed. Of those, 475,328 unserved households receive less than 10/1 internet speed. Broadband internet is one of the great social equalizers of our time. It provides access to countless economic, educational, health, and

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social resources. If rural Ohio is to thrive, access to broadband must expand.

Ohio has taken steps in recent years to begin to address this challenge. The establishment of the state broadband office, BroadbandOhio, has created a centralized resource for state agencies, internet service providers and local governments.

Additionally, the General Assembly during the 134th General Assembly established the Ohio Residential Broadband Expansion Grant Program. The General Assembly later provided this program with \$250 million in state funding as part of the state biennial budget bill. Initial awards from the grant program are expected to extend service to 43,000 households, with internet service providers further committing to serve an additional 52,000 households. This is a good first step and CCAO will continue to monitor the progress of these expansion projects.

Additional funding will be necessary going forward to continue to expand service to unserved and underserved Ohioans.

Counties look to play a role in expanding broadband service to county residents. There are numerous sources of funding available at the federal, state and local levels to fund expansion projects. What counties need is state assistance on how these different programs can work together so counties

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can most effectively expand service to residents.

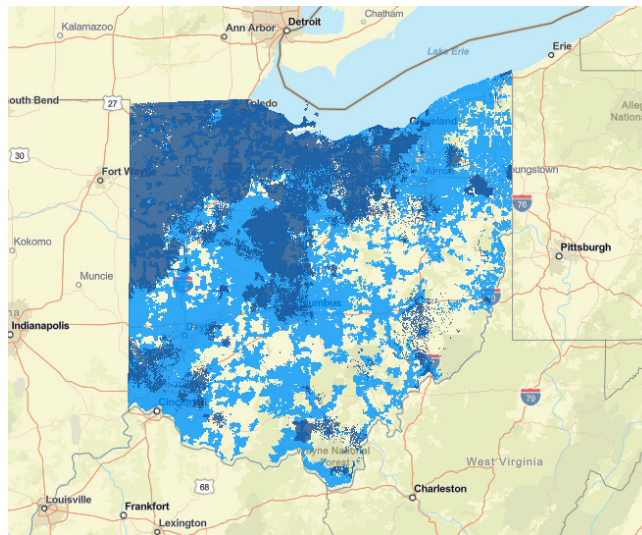
Many counties lack the technical expertise required to navigate the numerous different broadband programs and funding streams. CCAO supports efforts to consolidate and simplify the numerous existing broadband programs and promote centralization where possible. The state should also expand assistance efforts to counties in creating and implementing broadband expansion projects. Furthermore, the state should coordinate with counties on expansion projects to avoid duplication

of effort and to make best use of available funds. Finally, mapping of existing broadband service needs to be improved in order to facilitate local expansion projects.

With such a significant need for broadband service, all types of broadband providers should be able to serve Ohioans. CCAO opposes legislative efforts to limit or prohibit community broadband networks.

Counties also look to secure more reliable cell phone service across all portions of the state. Counties would also like to continue to explore ways to provide cost-efficient emergency services communications and secure adequate funding to provide these critical services. This can range from partnerships for radio systems and towers to appropriate implementation of Next Generation 9-1-1.

Counties should have the authority to make use of utility infrastructure, such as cell, MARCS and cable towers, for county emergency communication equipment. Shareability of tower space between different platforms, where possible, is critical to the efficient deployment of multiple technologies, including emergency communications and broadband. Existing tower assets should be utilized to the maximum extent possible for these purposes.



Ohio Broadband Coverage Map (Source: www.broadband.ohio.gov)

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RURAL ROAD FUNDING

While CCAO supports the expansion and development of agribusinesses as well as all industries, including new energy infrastructure development, counties need more resources and assistance to address new infrastructure demands caused by this expansion and development. County roads are impacted by the development of new industries in rural areas and the day-to-day operation of certain facilities. CCAO supports additional grants and resources from the state to help finance such infrastructure. Such grants should give consideration to the amount of roadway impacted.

CCAO also supports a requirement that any industry that unduly impacts roadways consult with commissioners and engineers to identify financing for infrastructure improvements or road use maintenance agreements. These industries should assume some responsibility when roads have been unduly impacted. CCAO also supports a restructuring of the fees and fines associated with load limits on highways to combat irresponsible use of county roadways.

CCAO supports a requirement that, in addition to local governments, county engineers should be notified of anticipated major new operations or expansions of businesses. County engineers also should be permitted more flexibility in force accounts to provide for rural road and bridge repair.

CCAO is opposed to reductions or temporary suspensions of the state gas tax, which would diminish funding for Ohio's rural roadways.

CCAO recommends the state's economic development efforts focus various incentives and or development grant monies toward development of rural infrastructure necessary to support the agriculture industry. Also important is maintaining access to key processing facilities in urban areas that are utilized by the agriculture industry.

FEDERAL WATERS OF THE U.S. RULES

Waters of the United States (WOTUS) is a term used in the federal Clean Water Act to determine what waters fall under federal jurisdiction versus state permitting authority. WOTUS has been the subject of long-running regulatory uncertainty over where federal jurisdiction

begins and ends for protected waterways and water infrastructure. Recently the Biden administration began the process to repeal the 2020 WOTUS rule and to conduct a rewrite.

As owners and operators of water infrastructure, the WOTUS definition can have a significant impact on federal regulation of county assets. As the new WOTUS rule is written and implemented, counties wish to work with federal and state regulatory agencies to achieve a pragmatic implementation that maintains clean water goals without hindering counties' vast infrastructure responsibilities.

DRAINAGE

The petition drainage process is a critical tool available to counties to manage excess water for property protection and agricultural soil productivity maximization. Ensuring adequate maintenance of rivers, creeks, and other tributaries is an important component of effective water management. CCAO applauds the recent reform of Ohio's petition drainage statutes and will continue to monitor the updated process for further potential improvements.

FARMLAND RESTORATION

Parts of rural Ohio have seen significant utility construction in recent years, particularly pipeline construction, which has impacted many acres of Ohio farmland. While these projects help generate economic activity, they also can negatively impact soil productivity and damage drainage systems along the construction route. The failure to replace topsoil to adequate depth and repair preexisting drainage systems can greatly reduce soil productivity or require significant landowner expense to return the land to its original productivity.

All pipeline construction projects in Ohio crossing agricultural land should incorporate the Ohio Pipeline Standards and Construction Specifications developed by the Ohio Department of Agriculture. These standards ensure that farmland affected by pipeline construction will be returned to its previous productive state once construction has concluded.

As solar development continues to expand across the state, the future decommissioning of solar facilities is an issue of increasing importance for

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counties. Senate Bill 52 of the 134th General Assembly required that a decommissioning performance bond be posted prior to construction and updated every five years to ensure land is returned to its original state. Ensuring that these bonds are sufficient to fund all decommissioning activities is critical, and CCAO supports increasing these amounts if needed.

CURRENT AGRICULTURAL USE VALUATION

Current Agricultural Use Valuation (CAUV) is an important program that allows Ohio farmland to be valued for property tax purposes at its agricultural use. This provides significant savings for most property owners and allows land to stay in agricultural production.

The General Assembly undertook a significant rewrite of the CAUV formula in 2017, and the changes were fully implemented in tax year 2022. The result of these reforms has largely been appreciable declines in CAUV values.

The fiscal impact of the reworked CAUV formula should be monitored as formula changes are fully implemented. The recent declines have helped bring property tax relief to farmers who experienced historic CAUV value increases in past years, but CCAO also recognizes that property taxes are important sources of revenue that provide for many county services, fund our schools and support our townships.

CCAO also supports the work of county auditors to enforce CAUV eligibility to ensure that those who benefit from the program utilize the land for its lawfully intended purpose.

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

FUNDING OF OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

CCAO supports increasing the level of state and federal support for OSU Extension provided that an

appropriate share of new funds will be used to relieve county general fund contributions. Maintaining an OSU Extension educator in each county and building capacity in priority program areas should be the top priorities.

OSU Extension builds better lives and stronger communities through partnerships and sharing knowledge; supports Ohio's number one industry, agriculture; and develops future leaders through 4-H. Each county's OSU Extension program works with county government to meet local needs with the input of local people to most efficiently use scarce resources. In addition to agriculture and 4-H, OSU

Extension administers federally funded nutrition education programs; helps individuals, families and businesses manage resources; and supports community development. On-farm research to study nutrient management is identifying ways to reduce harmful algal blooms (HAB's) in Ohio's lakes. 4-H members gain skills that prepare them to enter the workforce through community clubs and school

programs. People of all ages learn to "live healthy, live well" and better manage finances through OSU Extension.

The critical partnership between counties and OSU Extension requires flexibility and openness to constructive input from commissioners. The needs and expectations of counties regarding Extension vary considerably from county to county. It is important that Extension administration recognize these variations and provide flexibility so that Extension practices can more closely mirror that of host counties.

FUNDING OF OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

CCAO supports funding for academic programs of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences (CFAES) as well OSU Extension.

ALL PIPELINE CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS IN OHIO CROSSING AGRICULTURAL LAND SHOULD INCORPORATE THE OHIO PIPELINE STANDARDS AND CONSTRUCTION SPECIFICATIONS DEVELOPED BY THE OHIO DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE.

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Agriculture is a \$100-billion-dollar-plus industry for our state, so a competent agricultural workforce is critical to our economic well-being. The Agricultural Technical Institute (ATI), OSU's two-year program, is the leading producer of two-year degrees in food and agriculture in the U.S. Well over 90% of ATI and CFAES graduates are placed in jobs or continue their education within six months of graduation. Seventy percent of those graduates remain in Ohio, keeping our #1 industry strong. CCAO supports a funding mechanism for ATI that takes into consideration the unique nature of this program – a two-year degree program within a four-year institution – so that it can provide job-ready grads for Ohio employers.

FUNDING OF OARDC

CCAO supports a continuation of state funding for the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center (OARDC) to continue the growth and development of Ohio's agricultural industry, along with stewardship of the environment.

OARDC is the research arm of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences of The Ohio State University and is a leader in the AgBiosciences that integrates scientific disciplines critical to food production, safety and health; environmental sustainability; and biobased energy, fuel and products.

- OARDC research is conducted on the Columbus and Wooster campuses as well as CFAES 11 outlying research stations and field labs. These locations enable OARDC research to provide direct impact on economic development and regional planning statewide. The close collaboration between OARDC and the OSU network advances knowledge, advances science, and advances industry.
- The State of Ohio's investment in OARDC leverages more than \$175 million in current grants and contracts from both the public and private sectors - a more than \$5 return on investment for every \$1 invested.
- OARDC has a history spanning more than 125 years of providing comprehensive research and development programs to Ohioans in the AgBiosciences. This history has been critical to

the growth and competitiveness of our major commodities and value-added industries as well as providing new and emerging industries the science-based information needed to solve problems impacting market sustainability.

- OARDC is an economic engine for Ohio that brings in federal and private-sector grant funds and helps grow businesses.

FARMLAND PRESERVATION

CCAO supports fair and equitable policies to encourage the preservation of economically viable agricultural land and protect it from urban encroachment and conflicting land uses. Farmland preservation should be encouraged as a means to maintain a thriving agricultural industry in Ohio and foster the expansion and development of agribusiness.

The need for farmland preservation should be included in any comprehensive county land use plan and determined through a local consensus building process involving municipalities, townships, school districts, local development and business interests, farmers and the general public.

Legislation also should be enacted to give counties the tools they need to preserve farmland and encourage quality urban development while respecting property rights. This includes legislation to allow counties to increase the period of recoupment for CAUV, with the added proceeds going towards farmland preservation efforts, agricultural economic development, comprehensive planning and infrastructure projects.

State programs should include technical assistance and funding to assist in local administration, monitoring and enforcement. In addition, authority should be granted so that the holder of any new easement may charge a fee to support mandated responsibilities.

The Ohio Department of Agriculture's Office of Farmland Preservation, in partnership with local governments and private land conservancies, should provide funding for the purchase of agricultural easements to compensate farmers for agreeing to keep agricultural land in farm production permanently. This has occurred due to the successful

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passage of the Clean Ohio Bond Initiative. CCAO supports a review of Clean Ohio Fund distribution between the Ohio Farmland Preservation Office and Natural Resources Assistance Councils, as well as the inclusion of farmland for eligibility in greenspace/openspace project funding.

Another farmland preservation tool is Agricultural Security Areas (ASA). This program was created in 2005 and allows one or more landowners of at least 500 acres of contiguous farmland to enroll into an ASA for 10 years. This will protect the farmland from non-agricultural development. Public-private partnerships should be considered in order to qualify more farmland. Land that is owned by local governments, if the local government would like to participate, should be allowed to help landowners qualify for an ASA.

A review of Ohio's existing farmland preservation programs is needed as agricultural acreage comes under significant development pressures. The rise of solar energy development, in addition to other forms of development, are placing unprecedented pressures on Ohio farmland. In turn, this creates significant barriers to entry for beginning farmers. Traditional agricultural preservation programs such as easement purchases and ASA, while appreciated, may no longer be sufficient tools to protect agricultural land in many areas. In particular, the relatively low fine amount of \$500 for development within an ASA should be revised upward. The state should consider further protections for agricultural land in communities which seeks to ensure its preservation.

When discussing farmland preservation, we also recognize that having strong urban centers where people want to work and raise a family are important

in preventing rural sprawl. In a holistic approach, the state should examine its policies and planning related to urban growth and revitalization of our urban cores.

FOOD ACCESS

Ohio agriculture has a key role to play in reducing food scarcity, particularly in "food deserts" where access to grocery stores in urban areas is limited. Urban agriculture and locally-grown initiatives are a means to supplement food supplies by producing food in non-traditional agricultural settings. These are important tools to improving nutrition across the state. CCAO has additional information on access to healthy food in the Metropolitan and Regional Affairs section of the platform.

A REVIEW OF OHIO'S EXISTING FARMLAND PRESERVATION PROGRAMS IS NEEDED AS AGRICULTURAL ACREAGE COMES UNDER SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT PRESSURES.